



DISABLED PERSON'S GRANT SUBMISSION

Comhairle joined forces with the National Disability Authority (NDA) in July 2003 to draw up a submission to the Review of the Disabled Person's Grant. The data upon which this submission is based came from a variety of sources including Citizen Information Centres, disability organisations, local authorities and the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

This submission is important because it has given Comhairle and the NDA an opportunity to comment jointly, for the first time, on the problems identified with the Disabled Person's Grant as an element of housing policy that directly affects people with disabilities.

The submission is backed up by case studies of individual difficulties reported to Citizens Information Centres.

ONE CASE STUDY FROM THE SUBMISSION

A CIC client had been approved for receipt of the DPG and was awaiting assessment by an Occupational Therapist. However, due to the acute shortage of available Occupational Therapists to assess the level of adaptation required, the client's case had been on hold for a number of months. The client also experienced delays in acquiring quotes from registered building contractors. However, having overcome these difficulties the client returned to the county council to inquire about the processing of the grant. To her distress the client was informed that grant funds were depleted and that the county council was no longer in a position to consider her application.

The CIC worker attempted to find alternative funding for the client through the Special

Housing Aid for the Elderly Scheme, which offers a Home Improvements Scheme to eligible applicants. The Health Board Coordinator of the Housing Aid Scheme reported a dramatic increase in cases where insufficient funds available for the DPG meant that some people were resorting to the Housing Aid for the Elderly Scheme in the hope of securing funding.

The joint Comhairle / NDA submission makes a number of recommendations for the short and long term in relation to the operation of the grant. Copies of the submission are available on the Comhairle website www.comhairle.ie or from the editor.

“Adjustments to the funding and administration of the DPG must be urgently implemented.”

Continued...

MIGRANT WORKERS EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS

A number of CICs have reported cases where breaches of statutory employment rights for migrant workers have occurred over the last few months.

The social policy team has been liaising with the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment on a number of these issues. The main difficulty is the vulnerable position of migrant workers and their attachment to a specific employer who 'owns' their work permit. Employees in this situation are not confident to openly make a complaint for fear of losing their job and also losing their work permit in the process.

The Department has however sent inspectors into specific areas as a direct result of social policy reports to Comhairle and hopefully this will result in a positive outcome for the employees involved and for the general position of migrant workers in Ireland.

This type of abuse will inevitably continue and migrant employees will continue to be afraid to make their complaints public for as long as they remain tied to one employer through the work permit system.

Let us know if queries relating to these issues or other similar issues have increased in your CIC or information centre.

CICS ORGANISE ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION ON DISABLED PERSON'S GRANT



Left to right: Marcella Hannon, South Western Area Health Board, Mark Creegan, Enable Ireland, Peter Kearns, Forum of People with Disabilities, Vicki Hughes, Development Manager Tallaght CIS, Eleanor Beresford, Tallaght CIS.

As part of Disability Information Awareness Week four CICs from Ballyfermot, Clondalkin, Crumlin and Tallaght initiated a round table discussion on the Disabled Person's Grant. The round table was aimed at developing a discussion paper for submission to Comhairle, the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, South Dublin County Council, the South Western Area Health Board and other relevant disability groups and organisations.

Those invited to participate in the discussion included representatives from

the statutory, voluntary and community sectors. Ballyfermot Citizens Information Service hosted the event in the Community Civic Centre and it was facilitated by Mr. Alan Dunne from the Disability Federation of Ireland. The discussion generated a very lively debate regarding the many difficulties with the funding and administration of the Disabled Person's Grant. Possible solutions were also addressed in the discussion. A report is currently being compiled.

Voice

Influencing Social Policy

Comhairle aims to 'influence policy developments by highlighting the concerns of service users as to the effectiveness of social and civil services.'

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"A long term approach is required which is not derailed by short term budgetary problems but is developed over time with the objective of delivering equity and fairness for all"

PRE BUDGET SUBMISSION TO BUDGET 2004

BUDGET 2004 SHOULD TARGET SUPPORTS FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

As European Year of People with Disabilities draws to a close a targeted approach is called for by Comhairle to provide the services and structures required by people with disabilities to support independent living. A range of measures to address these and other issues is proposed by Comhairle in its submission for Budget 2004.

This submission addresses the social policy issues, which were of most concern to people who used the services of Citizens Information Centres during 2002 and early 2003. The key recommendations relating to disability in the submission include:

- A **Costs of Disability Allowance** (non means tested) should be introduced to cover extra transport, heating, education and assistance costs for people with significant disabilities – to reduce disincentives to employment, training and education and to promote independent living;
- The **Disabled Persons Grant** for home adaptations' budget was cut by an estimated €0.25 million in 2003. Comhairle recommends an increase in the funding available, the publication of a national policy for the administration of the grants and a requirement that grants be applied consistently across Local Authorities.
- **Home Help Services** remain poorly developed and unevenly distributed.

Amidst concerns that informal care provision will reduce in the future it is imperative that we invest in the provision of services that support care in the home.

Other issues covered in the submission include inadequate income maintenance and other supports for carers, disincentives for unemployed people returning to work, administration of the rent supplement scheme, income maintenance and accommodation problems for asylum seekers and eligibility problems facing some social welfare recipients in relation to medical card entitlements.

Medical card income guidelines have not kept pace with social welfare increases. In January 2002, the Minister for Health and Children said that nobody should lose a medical card because of increases in social welfare payments. But evidence from CICs shows that people whose only income is a social welfare payment are still being refused medical cards.

- The income guidelines for medical cards need to be raised and aligned with social welfare payments and the minimum wage.

The full submission can be found on www.comhairle.ie or a copy can be obtained from the editor

Contact us: What are the main social policy issues for you this month? Have you dealt with an issue locally? Would you like to publicise a social policy issue? Get in touch!

information for all

Comhairle Submission to the Family Support Agency Strategic Plan

Comhairle made a submission to the Family Support Agency Strategic Plan in September 2003. The submission focused on information and the potential to jointly develop social policy work in relation to family policy.

Comhairle suggests in this submission that a possible future relationship with the Family Support Agency could include liaising with the Citizens Information

Centres, the Money Advice and Budgeting Service and the Citizens Information Call Centre regarding the impact that Government policy is having on families. Comhairle could work with the Family Support Agency to develop a process of social policy feedback from the Family and Community Services Resource Centre Programme and from the Family Mediation Service to inform the Minister of trends in

policy and the effects these are having on families.

The submission also stresses how important it is to promote awareness of the range and type of services available to help families so that they can decide which service is most appropriate to their needs. Full submission available on www.comhairle.ie or from the editor.

Family Matters

The National Social Services Board (which amalgamated with the National Rehabilitation Board to form Comhairle in 2000) published a social policy report in September 1994 (The UN Year of the Family). This publication called *Family Matters*, aimed to reflect many of the realities of family life through the concerns expressed by members of the public who visited Citizen Information Centres. The main themes identified in the report were marital breakdown, lone parents and cohabitation. The report raised a number of important policy issues. Underlying these issues was the need to support and develop an ethos of joint parenting in the context of a range of diverse and changing family structures.

Comhairle plans to publish an update of Family Matters in 2004 for the tenth anniversary of the Year of the Family.

CIC staff and information providers in the community and voluntary sector please let us know about family related queries that have a social policy dimension and can demonstrate the difficulties families experience with Government policy in their daily lives.

SPECIAL HOUSING AID FOR THE ELDERLY IN NORTH WEST CONNEMARA

Declan Weir of Clifden Citizens Information Centre in Galway obtained funding from the Comhairle Social Policy Grant Scheme in 2002. He examined the Special Housing Aid for the Elderly scheme as administered by the Western Health Board in north west Connemara. The report is based on queries dealt with by Clifden CIC, interviews with older people who had applied for the scheme, health board personnel and people in voluntary and community organisations working with older people. The study documents and analyses the experiences and perceptions of both older people who had applied for the scheme and those who work with them or advocate on their behalf.

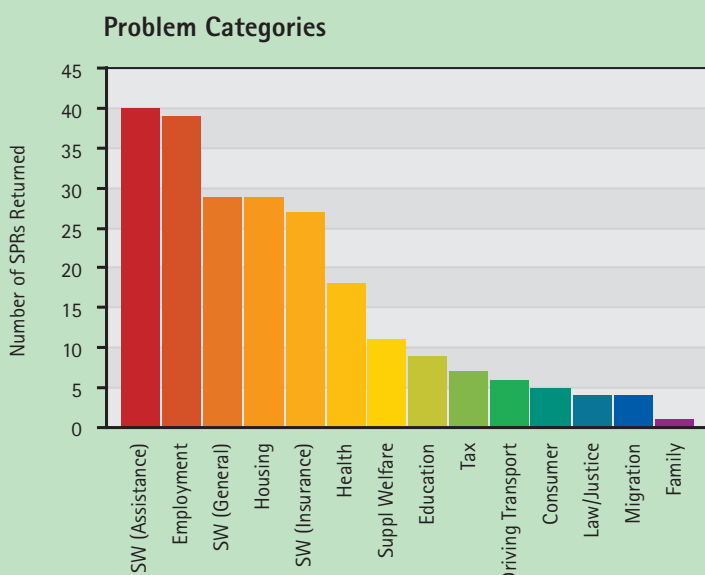
Concerns ranged from a lack of feedback in respect of applications submitted, to the length of time taken to carry out the work. Issues identified included the amount of aid payable, the fact that major structural repairs could not be carried out under the scheme, the lack of availability of contractors to carry out the work, and the standard of work in some instances.

The report examines the scheme as it operates locally, particularly the initiative between the Western Health Board, FÁS (Community Employment) and FORUM (a local community development organisation) and notes the success of this collaboration. It considers the potential local impact of the proposed changes in Community Employment and finally draws conclusions and makes recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of the scheme.

A copy of the full report is available from Declan Weir in Clifden CIC. Email address: clifden.cic@comhairle.ie or Tel. (095) 22000.

QUARTERLY SOCIAL POLICY REPORT APRIL TO JUNE 2003

The Quarterly Social Policy Report for the second quarter of 2003 is now available. The chart (left) illustrates the problem categories arising most frequently in the social policy records returned by CICs. The predominant issues for this quarter include social welfare (Assistance) and employment related queries both of which account for approximately 17 % of the social policy records received by Comhairle. The full report is available to download on www.comhairle.ie or from the editor. The July to September 2003 Quarterly Report is now being prepared.



SOCIAL POLICY WORKERS WORK TOGETHER

The Social Policy Network set up in 2002 has grown, and now represents social policy workers from organisations as diverse as the Combat Poverty Agency, the National Disability Authority, The Forum of People with Disabilities, the Conference of Religious of Ireland, the Community Development Support Programme, Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and the National Council on Ageing and Older People and the National Women's Council.

Social Policy workers from these organisations now meet regularly to discuss areas where joint work could be more effective in influencing Government policy.

The most recent network meeting discussed how the various organisations might work more effectively together in the future in preparing Pre Budget Submissions and influencing Budget decisions.

“The rules for the Family Income Supplement scheme currently act as a disincentive for unemployed people to take up paid work.”

COMHAIRLE SOCIAL POLICY GRANTS

Comhairle Social Policy Grants are available to support social policy initiatives undertaken by independent information providers, particularly Citizens Information Centres and local voluntary and community organisations.

To apply contact Catherine Brennan at 01 605 9003 or email catherine.brennan@comhairle.ie

Citizens Information Centres Providing a 'Voice'

CUTBACKS HITTING THE MOST VULNERABLE

At a time when Ireland's per capita income is well above the European average, and with Ireland now having the lowest taxation levels and the lowest spend on social protection (EU Commission and OECD figures), Citizens Information Centres are reporting a number of worrying trends affecting their most vulnerable clients. Their concerns are backed up by the statistics which show that in 2002 overall expenditure on Employment Supports which include schemes such as the Family Income Supplement, the Back to Work Allowance and the Back to Education Allowance decreased by €14.5 million, a decrease in spending of over 5%. Over the same period the total number of recipients of Employment Supports decreased by 5,972 or 10.5% (DSFA, 2002). During 2002 the live register figures remained relatively static (CSO, 2003).

FAMILY INCOME SUPPLEMENT – A DISINCENTIVE

The rules for the Family Income Supplement scheme currently act as a disincentive for some unemployed people to take up paid work.

The qualifying working hours for Family Income Supplement (FIS) should be reduced to 17.5 as many lone parents are job sharing (a 35-hour week being increasingly common) and many fail to qualify for FIS due to the number of hours worked.

CIC social policy returns also show that some local authorities take Family Income Supplement into account when calculating differential rent while others disregard income from this source. Comhairle believes that all local authorities should treat income from FIS consistently.

RENT SUPPLEMENT CAP STILL CAUSING DIFFICULTIES

The cap on the Rent Supplement continues to cause difficulties for people who are unable to access accommodation where the rent payable falls below the maximum level set by health boards. The maximum level of rent considered by health boards as being reasonable is dependant on the 'going rate' for rents in the health board

area. Research carried out for the upcoming social policy report on housing shows that current rents being achieved in health board areas around the country continue to exceed the maximum levels set by the rent cap. This finding suggests that the rent cap has not been successful in its stated aim of reducing rents. The Residential Tenancies Bill 2003 contains provisions relating to rent setting and when established on a statutory basis it may have the power to limit rents to the market rate for an area. In the meantime our information is that a review of the maximum rent levels set by the Department is imminent. If your CIC can provide evidence that market rent levels in a particular locality have increased please let us know.

LETTERS OF DEPORTATION

Increasingly we are finding that concerned non-Irish national parents awaiting a decision on residency are contacting CICs for information and advice regarding their applications. Following the decision of the Supreme Court in the cases of L & O earlier this year the Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform stated that outstanding claims to reside in the State on the basis of parentage of an Irish born child would be examined and decided individually. The Department is now issuing 'letters of deportation', which state that applicants have 15 days in which to make representations as to why they should not be deported. The letter refers to existing legislation but gives the applicant no indication of what kind of representation should be made or how to proceed in this regard. One CIC reported a woman who received this correspondence as being in a very confused and distressed state.

In a letter to the Office of the Refugee Applications Tribunal Comhairle stated that the Department should provide more complete information to applicants on what kind of representation is appropriate. It was also stated that 15 days is insufficient time in which to make an adequate representation and that applicants should be assisted in accessing legal advice.

The response from the Department stated that the Minister is satisfied that the letters issued are "in accordance with the law and with fair and reasonable procedures".